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Economy partly to blame for private school enrollment decline

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HONOLULU (KHNL) - For the first time in a decade, Hawaii's private schools are experiencing a drop in enrollment. They say the current economy has a lot to do with it.

This year, private school enrollment statewide is down 2.3%. That may not sound too bad, until you consider private schools had been growing at a fairly dramatic rate the past 10 years.

"J-A-N-U-A-R-Y. January," a group of students said aloud.

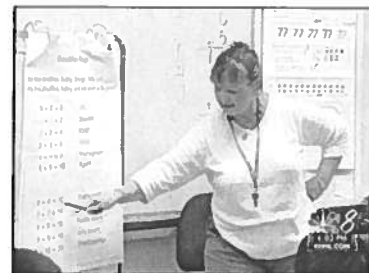
The first graders at Our Savior Lutheran School in Aiea can spell words like 'January' and 'resolution' with ease. If only dealing with the economy were just as simple.

"We haven't had a major issue with parents leaving en masse," George Evensen, principal, said.

"Is that something you worry about?" this reporter asked.

"Yes," he replied.

After modest hikes in tuition the past few years, the school decided not to increase the cost at all this year in an effort to help struggling families.



"We debated about it because we do have a building program," Evensen said about school renovations. "We want to replace these buildings."

There are 39,344 students enrolled in private schools across the state this year. That's down from last year's total of 40,272.

The Hawaii Association of Independent Schools says the bad economy is only partly to blame for the decline.

"We're looking at demographics as well," Robert Witt, HAIS executive director, said. "It's certainly true that here in Hawaii, as well as all across the country, the number of school-aged children has leveled off and started to decrease rather dramatically."

Private schools say they're working hard to preserve their current enrollment and reach out to new families.

"We're asking our schools to re-think the way they do things," Witt said. "We're saying this is not a particularly good time to think about business as usual."

They're also hoping parents, who are looking to prioritize during these tough economic times, will cut elsewhere.

"Possibly they'll defer the purchase of a new car. Maybe they won't renovate the kitchen this year. They'll wait a couple of years," Witt said. "One of the things I don't think families in Hawaii are willing to do is defer a good education."

School officials say they've increased their fundraising efforts and are offering more financial aid.

With private school enrollment down, there should be more students in public schools, right? That's not the case.

The state Department of Education says its enrollment is also down. Last year, 178,369 children attended public and charter schools across Hawaii. This year, there are 177,871 students.



Robert Witt



George Evensen

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